



# Embodied Curating

## Reflections on Autotheory as Ways in and through the Work

Alicia Reymond, Lauren Fournier

As curators, who are we and where are we going? What drives our work? What motivates our practices of curation? What role does language, literature, writing, and storytelling play? And where do our bodies come into this work—when it comes to subjective embodiment and phenomenological leanings, but also to labor, race, class? How can we consider the place of our desires and drives in contemporary curatorial practice, rooted as we both are in intersectional, anti-racist feminist frameworks, and working as white women? Here, we reflect on autotheory in terms of curatorial strategies. We reflect on our own practices as curators through the framework of autotheory, or the bridging of autobiography, embodiment, and self-reflection with theory, philosophy, and criticism: autotheory as a practice that melds the more scholarly, academic, research-based mode with autobiographical and reflective work.

# Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism

Lauren Fournier



Alicia Raymond: We've both studied literature at a graduate or post-graduate level, before coming to have curatorial practices in the visual arts. Throughout our discussions prior to this written conversation, drawing analogies between these two realms—literature and art—came in handy, as a way of questioning both the curator's authorial voice and exhibition-making processes and narratives. Therefore, I would like to open this conversation by referring to what is called in French a *pacte de lecture*. A *pacte de lecture* is an either explicit or implicit conscious agreement, a convention passed between two entities: the author and the reader, that will determine what one can *expect* from a text, often depending on its "genre." In doing so, the author commits to sticking to certain rules. Despite their respective roles, it supposedly creates an equality between the author and the reader, who is made aware of the rules of the game. To transfer this to contemporary art, if we were to presume that audiences are reading an exhibition, then what kind of game is at play, how are the rules negotiated and who's the author?

Lauren Fournier: The curator role is one that has come under critique over the past decades. The turn toward the curatorial in contemporary art practice is not unlike the *auteur* turn in film theory, which held that the director of a film is the *auteur* or "author" with primary, if not *sole*, creative control—despite filmmaking being a fundamentally collaborative endeavor (involving such other roles as the screenwriter, cinematographer, editor, sound designer, and so on). In like manner, having the curator understood as the *auteur* of an exhibition is a problem, considering that it passes creative control from the artists whose works are on view to the curator whose role is to frame, contextualize, and *care* for that work. To be in an authorial role is to have authorship, but also authority. Hence the critique of an *auteur* approach to curation—one I have the sense we both agree with.

AR: I agree. Then, what could a "post-auteur" curatorial practice look like? For me, such a practice would need to re-orient the curatorial role to one focused on the subjective *labor* or work of curation—taking care of the artworks but also the artists, and the ways those artists and artworks are contextualized and framed. Such an approach is linked to the notion of the curator as instigator. I'm interested in thinking about authorship through the lens of instigating. Acknowledging that curatorial labor is deeply embodied allows to instigate ways of making the personal visible in our curatorial practices while remaining committed to and invested in our practices as curators who are there to support the artists with whom we're working. I reached out to you a couple months ago after coming across your book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), as I was keen to discuss and explore if autotheory as a practice that shuttles between the personal and the theoretical could help shape such curatorial practices. Being aware that you too are a curator, I was curious to know how you conceive of the relationship between autotheory and curation?

LF: It is exactly the awareness of the tension between foregrounding ourselves as curators—our stakes, motivations, positions, subjective embodiments—and risking displacing too much attention on the curatorial, at the expense of the artists' practices and works for which we, as curators, take care, my understanding of the politics and ethics of autotheory drives me to position myself in my work. An autotheoretical approach to curating, for me, is rooted in the belief that there is something politically, ethically, and aesthetically interesting, generative, and important about being self-reflective about how I relate to the works at hand and how I frame them. As a white, more or less cis, queer/bisexual woman from a low-income, working-class background, who is a first-generation college and university student, who was raised as a settler on stolen, Indigenous lands, and who is committed to actively anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and decolonial practice (in structural and anti-tokenistic ways, I should add), I think it is crucial to be aware of my positioning when I am curating the work of others—not only in a sense of identity but also in the sense of *What is bringing me to this*

*work, why am I here and what am I bringing? What are my aims here, what are my motivations and investments? And then, moving beyond self-reflection to consider the others involved: What role does relationship play in this, how and in what ways are the artists benefitting, how and in what ways are the audiences benefitting, how and in what ways are the communities benefitting, really, if we are being honest? Do the communities want us here? And what about inviting others into our own communities—the art communities and literary communities we might be a part of? Would others want to join in?*

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Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, MIT Press, 2021

AR: If a rootedness in situatedness—i.e placing our perspective into the historical, political, economic and social contexts of the topics we're delving into—drives the thinking and research of an autotheoretical practice, we should recall that autotheory largely stems from the

genealogies of BIPOC and non-Western as well as queer feminisms. Acknowledging that we're setting foot in anti-racist and intersectional feminism issues, we must figure out how/if/where we, but also *our bodies*, fit into these histories and struggles. In my case, I ask myself: how can I—as a white Swiss, bisexual cis woman working from a privileged position in a privileged country—grapple with autotheory in an appropriate way?

LF: This makes me think of when my undergraduate students ask me if they are “allowed” to write their essays and critical response papers in the first-person, because in many of their classes they were told not to. Socratically, I put the question back to them: what is the alternative? To pretend to be some kind of disembodied, “neutral” being via the third-person? When it comes to writing, students are still trained in so many disciplines to avoid the first-person at any time when they are writing something “formal” or “critical.” But both the first-person and the third-person are performative. I also understand some professors’ reservations at having students write in the first-person: they fear criticality will become subsumed by a too-personal “I,” and they want students—so accustomed as many of them are to sharing details of their lives online—to avoid simply writing their *opinions* (in contrast to an informed, well-researched opinion). This is where autotheory comes in: it shows the *auto* alongside *theory*, research alongside reflection, the self alongside others (citations, humans—sources of influence and information), suggesting how all of these aspects of living and thinking are actually inextricable, and how living and thinking feed into each other and nourish each other.

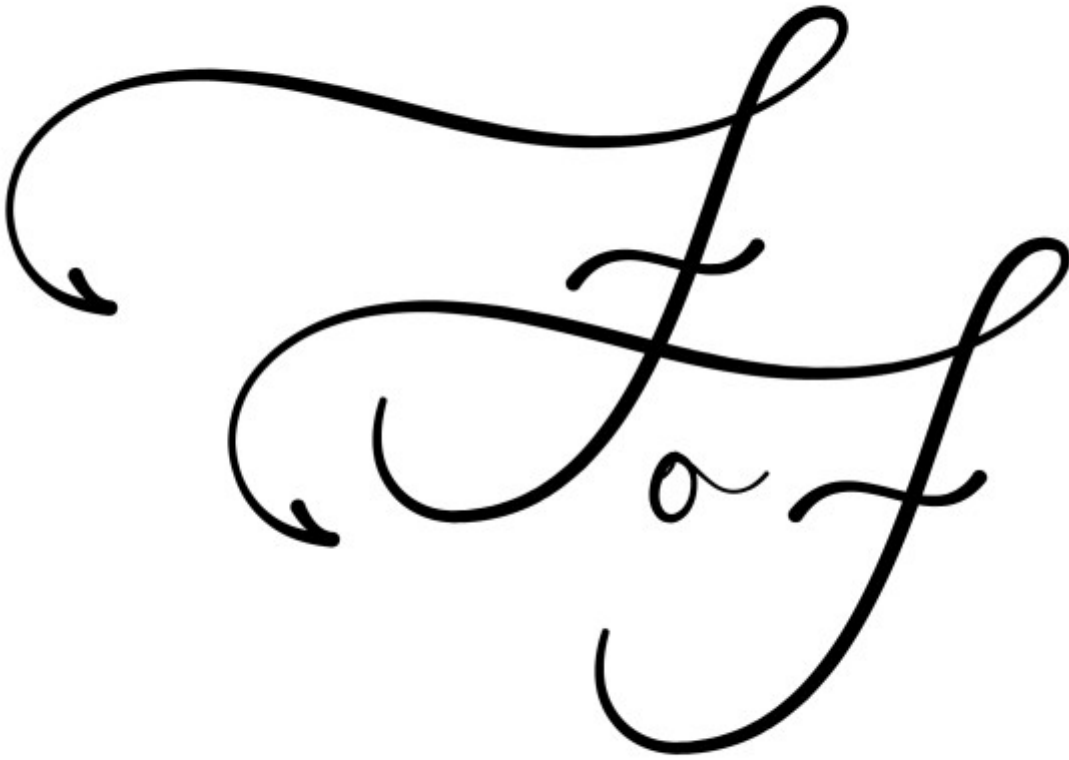
AR: You draw attention here to the conduciveness of autotheory to writing. Might autotheory therefore offer new ways of performing curatorial work as a situated writing practice?

LF: Yes, I think autotheory can offer curators new ways of writing about art and exhibitions. The relationship between autotheory, art writing and art criticism is rich and varied, with many writers who engage autotheory also having a practice of writing about contemporary art. This was something that struck me early on in my autotheory research: the motif of art writing. I think of texts spanning from Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* to Chris Kraus’s *Video Green*, where both write about works of art as part of their critiques—whether it is Rankine taking up anti-Black racism in the US, or Kraus looking at the stifling, classist turn she perceives in LA art schools in the 2000s. I also think of writers of creative nonfiction who have practices as art critics and who also write autotheoretically, like Hilton Als, who began as an (autotheoretical, I would argue) essayist and theatre critic, but now also engages with contemporary art and art writing. In the early days of my research into autotheory, one of my first observations was that autotheory emerges in these kinds of art writing texts and other forms of writing that exist in the liminal places between visual culture/performance/art and literature/writing/criticism. I was also finding the autotheoretical impulse in a range of art historical and historiographic writings, including Amelia Jones’s *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic Art History of New York Dada* or Jennifer Doyle’s *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, where Jones invokes her own mental health issues as part of her critical point of entry into writing about the suppressed life and work of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, as Doyle invokes her anxiety and difficulty at the thought of taking part in a one-on-one performance with Adrian Howells.

AR: As you highlight in your book, autotheory is part of a long history, or *histories*, that go back, to artist-philosopher Adrian Piper’s conceptual and body art in the early 1970s (a key anchoring point in this history, for you). There are other ties to this genre that you name and find resonant—Audre Lorde’s approach to biomythography as practiced in her *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Nicole Brossard’s fiction theory in books like *Picture Theory* (1982), Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s practice of auto-historia-teoría in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), or Hortense Spillers’ personal criticism (to borrow Nancy K.

Miller's term) approach to academic and literary historiographical work in her *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1985). There are Kraus representing the postmodern theory generation and Maggie Nelson representing the post-theory generation. Both address critical theory's institutionalization and supposed death—referring to theory leaving the walls of academia. What kind of approach do you observe in our generation?

LR: Yes, these histories are multiple, and longer than a myopic view on “the present day” suggests, and they are, in fact, even contested, conflicted, conflicting! I was always hesitant for my book to be a canon-making project—I really didn't want it to be. And yet I also understand, as a scholar, that this is in some ways unavoidable when one is working in an art historiographic or literary historiographic way. While I trace certain aspects of autotheory's histories, I emphasize that this is an ongoing process, one which I see my book as simply starting to think through, and that even my own reflections on autotheory are continuing to shift each day. There are many books which I hadn't read and/or which hadn't been published at the time I finished the last edits in late 2018/early 2019. Some notable examples include Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* (2020), on the author's lived experience as the first undocumented immigrant to graduate from Harvard University, or Carmen Maria Machado's *In The Dreamhouse* (2019). Machado gorgeously weaves autotheory and autofiction through a deliberately iterative approach to telling a story about trauma in an abusive queer/lesbian relationship. Villavicencio theorizes her experience as an “illegal immigrant,” or undocumented American, entering the Ivy League post-secondary institution of Harvard. It's compelling, important, and resonates with my recent writings on autotheory—specifically, the experience of first-generation college and university students as a surprisingly under-theorized site of knowledge and struggle (the topic of my forthcoming book). As for what kind of approach to autotheory I perceive around me: I think our generation is in the midst of processing what “autotheory” can mean. It's an exciting time. For some, autotheory continues to be a desirable way to work. Others reject it. These tensions around working “personally” have been going on for centuries and curiously continue strongly today, even amidst (or as a direct response to) pervasive social media technologies and other aspects of contemporary life that have each of us differentially “on display.”



Alicia Reymond, *flight of fancy*, 2019–

AR: While having been drawn to autotheoretical texts for a while now, I also turned these last couple years to a different kind of literature that inspired me in many ways. Indeed, when I created the curatorial platform *flight of fancy* in 2019, I had recently discovered the work of feminist science-fiction pioneers such as Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin and Marge Piercy, and I retrospectively realize that this curatorial initiative, starting with its name, is very much influenced by such readings. The expression *flight of fancy* invokes the power of imagination and I must admit that I was mainly interested, then, in the possibilities that the fictional realm and speculative fiction in particular—science-fiction, fantasy, magical realism, the new weird, etc.—offer, not so much for dreaming of possible futures, but rather for re-shaping our *current* realities by suggesting new forms of relationships to the world, to the nuclear family, to the reproduction of species, to technology, to gender difference, to racialization and to all types of exclusion. But I think that fictionalization, understood as the will and power to move beyond a binary dialectical comprehension of the *real* or the *actual*, can definitely be explored beyond literature. In 2018 I participated in a LARP—live action role play—called *dead air*, organized at Gossamer Gog in London by Omsk Social club. Larp can be defined as a mutually created fiction in which participants adopt characters authored by a larpwriter or game master (GM). Players contribute to improvised narratives by performing actions in character and become co-creators of their own realities. In a paper



called *The way you bite: hacking modes of perception through play*, my friend Tamara Hart and I touched upon the potential that larp and its mutability as a medium carries. We addressed how and why role-play, as a medium and practice, offers possibilities for building multiple identities and social worlds to inhabit, how play can be a tool for world building but also a methodology to rewrite rules, hack modes of perception, re-imagine social structures and build both micro and metacommunities. I see larp as an autotheoretical practice that I would like to experiment with to challenge not only audiences' expectations but also the curators' responsibility and control over the exhibition's discourse and life. I'm interested in games' potentialities, in developing further tools for worldbuilding within art spaces and communities, in envisioning scenarios that are both enthusiastic and critical. What role does literature or fiction play in your curatorial practice?

LF: I've been starting to think about and experience the practice of working from literature as a starting point for the curation of exhibitions and public programming: how a curatorial practice might "activate" a literary text, especially ones that might have been historically overlooked or under-explored. Back in 2019 I was invited as one of four curators to lead an exhibition series at the Durham Art Gallery: Rural Headquarters for Contemporary Art called *Teacher, Trickster, Chaos, Clay*. The series was inspired by Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* series. For this exhibition, us curators all read the books *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and shared thoughts on her writings. Our revisiting Butler's work felt startlingly prescient, as the COVID-19 pandemic brought a renewed, quite widespread interest in Butler's work: when you read *Parable*, you're struck by how prophetic Butler was. Way ahead of her time. For my exhibition *Clay*, I was collaborating with Ashley Jane Lewis—a residency focused on community sourdough starters and recipe-manifestoes. The plan is to transform the rural, public art gallery in Ontario into a functioning bakery for a 24-hour period, inviting folks from the gallery's communities back to this space for the first time following the pandemic closures. The exhibition will take place alongside the *Rural Reading Riot* literary festival, in which we bring in cookbook authors and other writers to explore the intersections between food and revolution. It is important for us to imagine the exhibition as telling a story that has multiple authors with multiple vantage points and perspectives, a story with multiple points of access or "ins." Literature becomes embodied and multi-sensorial—we're reading, but also smelling, tasting, feeling.

## LAUREN FOURNIER

Lauren Fournier (she/her) is a writer, curator, and filmmaker who writes autotheories and autofictions for the page and the screen. Her book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* was published by The MIT Press (2021) and has been featured and reviewed in such venues as *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism*, *High Theory*, *Woman's Art Journal*, *The Journal of Curatorial Studies*, and *Art In America*. Her novella, a hybrid work of autofiction and literary criticism, is forthcoming through Fiction Advocate (San Francisco). She has published fiction and other creative writings internationally, including the short story "The Grateful Dad" in *Soft Punk Magazine* (London, UK). She is the founder and director of the site-responsive, international curatorial platform *Fermenting Feminism*. She recently completed a Postdoctoral Fellowship in Visual Studies at the University of Toronto, where she teaches courses in art criticism and artists' writing. She is currently working on her second book on autotheory in development with The MIT Press.

## ALICIA REYMOND

Alicia Reymond (1992, CH) is an independent curator and researcher. In 2019, she launched the curatorial platform *flight of fancy* through which she pursues her current research informed by the summoning of imagination and embodied knowledge to reshape our current realities. She previously worked as Exhibition Assistant at the Barbican Art Gallery, where she notably contributed to extensive research on the exhibition *Into the Night: Cabarets and Clubs in Modern Art*. Prior to this, she has worked alongside curators at the Centre Pompidou and the Palais de Tokyo. She holds a BA in French Literature and Art History from the University of Geneva, as well as an MA in Art History and Curating from Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University.

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